

Hi! I'm going to be discussing David Carson and his work at Ray Gun magazine, and how his work connects with a postmodernist ethos.

David Carson is an amazing graphic designer who's turned graphic design on its head. Without much background in design, he started his first design job in the 80s at a small magazine called Transworld Skateboarding Magazine, moved onto Beach Culture, and then in 1992 became art director for Ray Gun magazine. It was there that he cemented his place in the graphic design world. When asked about designers he's inspired by, he can't name any. His limited schooling and nonchalant attitude prevented him from really following any designer or knowing names, or just knowing who to follow. But he does name a surfer – "Miki Dora" - who was his hero. So there's really no true inspiration for his work, only what he knows and feels, which makes his work that much more of a breakthrough for artists. He did NOT do things the way they had traditionally been done; he experimented with type and layouts, and sometimes things weren't legible at all. In a very well-known issue, he did an entire interview with Bryan Ferry in Zapf Dingbats because the interview was "rather dull". He stayed with Ray Gun for about three years, leaving in 1995. He continued on to work on many different projects, including advertising for Nike, Quiksilver, the Nine Inch Nails, and many more. I'm going to be focusing on his Ray Gun issues for this from 1992 to 1995.

David Carson's work for Ray Gun is postmodernist and can see aspects of both constructivism and deconstructivism. Postmodernism is described as cultural, intellectual or artistic state, which lacks a clear central hierarchy or organizing principle, and which embodies extreme complexity, contradiction, ambiguity, diversity and interconnectedness. Issue #3's cover doesn't truly align to a grid system, and the type hierarchy is questionable. The price of the issue is the same size as the subheadings. The name of the magazine, Ray Gun, runs off the sides of the page and doesn't abide by any margins. The photograph is flipped upside down. It's complete anarchy in a magazine cover; traditionally the magazine name stays the same, the design is always readable and legible, and the hierarchy plays by the rules. But with this cover, it's different. You can still read it, and it's still legible – it just takes a few more seconds to process.

His work is layered and organic; it remains consistent in that every cover is different. Not just the images, but the layout, the magazine name, everything changes from issue to issue. His work is bold, enthusiastic, experimental, and fully himself. He uses design rules, but only to break them.

Issue #16 has text all over the cover – you need to take a moment to read it and navigate through it. Ray Gun is bold and prominent, but some of the text on the cover is actually bigger. Alice In Chains is the cover story – you can tell as that is the first thing under Ray Gun. Otherwise, understanding what other text is on the page is confusing – unless you're into music, which most of the readers of the magazine are.

He prefers to use typography and layout to actively explore meanings – instead of being explicitly literal about what's going on, he uses different techniques to make you think about why he's doing something. For example, in his Morrissey spread he cropped half of Morrissey's head unnaturally because he felt like Morrissey was very mysterious. So instead of literally saying "Morrissey was being very mysterious", he desaturated the image and cropped it in a way to imply the meaning behind it.

The David Bowie cover is the last issue to be art directed by David Carson. It's Ray Gun's third anniversary issue, which is prominently displayed. I feel that this cover is one of the most simple appearing. The focus is on David Bowie's face – his anisocoria (what makes his pupils different sizes) is very much noticeable. His eyes are a striking blue compared the rest of the image, which is a bit desaturated. Ray Gun is written as one word, with only the R capitalized. The cover story is written above the magazine name so the focus of the cover remains on Bowie's face, and one of Bowie's lyrics – "Put a ray gun to my head..." is written smaller. The cover story spread for David Bowie again is a bit more simple – but still in true David Carson fashion, the type is deconstructed and it takes a minute to fully read and understand.

David Carson's design work for Ray Gun is iconic – you can't think of alternative music in the 1990s without the magazine coming to mind. He inspired generations of designers and challenged readers to read between the lines. His designs were meant to be interpreted, rather than presented as a clean standard of design. He deconstructed text and didn't limit himself to conventional design. His use of unnatural cropping distorted and deconstructed text, and audience participation points to postmodernist work. He takes things like song lyrics and designs them in a way that takes time to interpret. Postmodernism believes in questioning past beliefs and constructing our world in a new way. David Carson was able to speak visually and emotionally to a wide variety of audiences, not only through Ray Gun. But Ray Gun is what put his style on the map, and taking from postmodernism and constructivism/deconstructivism, he was able to nail down his aesthetic without giving up himself.